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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BUCHAREST 000103

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STATE FOR EUR/NCE; NSC FOR ADAM STERLING

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SUBJECT: TWO ROMANIAN CONTRACTORS DETAINED IN IRAQ:  
CONTROVERSY GROWS

Classified By: DCM Mark A. Taplin for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. News that two Romanian contractors have been detained since last October by MNF-I forces for having taken unauthorized photographs of U.S. military facilities has burst into a full-scale media flap in Bucharest. President Basescu raised the issue with the Ambassador on February 1, asking for his support in returning the two to Romania if they were not guilty of a crime and acted out of ignorance. The MFA, under fire for not having disclosed what it knew about the situation in November, defended its handling of the matter in a January 31 press conference and claimed the contractors had asked that the Ministry not publicize the matter. Romanian media speculated openly over whether the contractors had come into possession of embarrassing information about the activities of U.S. forces at the location at which they were employed. Swift action is needed to prevent the detention of the contractors from becoming a corrosive issue in our strong partnership with Romania. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) The Romanian Foreign Ministry (MAE) confirmed press reports of January 31 that two Romanian contractors had been detained in Iraq by US forces (later clarified to be under MNF-I). They were arrested October 31, 2006. Nelu Ilie (an electrician), 41, and Adrian Ganceanu (carpenter), 39, were reportedly detained after taking unauthorized pictures and videos inside a US base near Baghdad. Both were employed by a U.S. company that operates water bottling plants inside several US military bases in Iraq. Both men had apparently been working in Iraq since May 2006. Corina Vintan, the MFA spokesperson, told journalists the Ministry had first been informed about their arrest on November 7, deferring to a request by the workers and their families not to discuss their case publicly. She confirmed that a diplomat from the Romanian embassy in Baghdad had met with the men November 26 who had reported they were being treated well under acceptable conditions. The two workers were visited by a representative of the Red Cross January 26.

13. (SBU) Petru Dumitru, MFA Director-General for Global Affairs, contacted us on January 31 to provide background on how the Ministry was handling the case of the contractors, both from a public affairs and diplomatic standpoint. He was anxious to clarify some of the circumstances surrounding their detention. We explained that the workers were currently in MNF-I custody rather than U.S. Army custody and did not face any charges under Iraqi law, two points which

had been widely misreported in the Romanian media. We pledged to work closely with Romanian authorities in Bucharest to clarify the circumstances surrounding the detention of the two men and to try to expedite any review process of their status that needed to be undertaken

¶4. (C) At the end of a meeting on February 1 with visiting CFC-Afghanistan commander LTG Karl Eikenberry, President Basescu raised the issue with the Ambassador, and requesting that he look into the matter. Basescu said that it appeared the two contractors were merely that, "just an electrician and a carpenter." If they were guilty of a crime, Basescu went on, then there was a case to be made for continuing to hold them. But if they had acted more in ignorance than anything else, the Romanian President continued, he would want them to be repatriated to Romania as soon as possible. The Ambassador replied that we were working hard to establish the facts and to push for expedited handling of the case involving the contractors. He pledged that we would share the information we received with the presidential administration and others in the Romanian government.

¶5. (SBU) Meanwhile, even on a day in which both Microsoft head Bill Gates and the French Prime Minister were visiting Bucharest, the saga of the two contractors continued to play among the top stories. Increasingly, the Romanian media speculated about other reasons the two men might have been kept in detention so long, including the possibility that they had stumbled upon evidence of wrongdoing by coalition forces. Meanwhile, opponents of President Basescu used it as an occasion to level their guns at his handling of the matter. Bogdan Olteanu, President of the Chamber of Deputies, declared he would call foreign intelligence head Claudiu Saftoiu before Parliament to explain why the

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Romanians had been held so long. Senator and Conservative Party (PC) President Voiculescu called for Saftoiu's resignation, and PC party spokesman Bogdan Pascu implied that Foreign Minister Ungureanu should also resign. Social Democrat head Mircea Geoana blasted Basescu, labeling the Romanian President's remarks about the case as "ridiculous" and saying it was outrageous that "state institutions treat Romanian citizens with such contempt." Prime Minister Tariceanu cautiously remarked that he was seeking clarification before commenting further.

¶6. (C) COMMENT. The case of the two detained Romanians in Iraq has burned white-hot in the media since it broke on January 31, despite serious competition for the top headlines. We appreciate ongoing assistance from colleagues in Baghdad and in Washington to nip this particular flap in the bud. If we can find a way to repatriate the two in short order, it will likely prevent this episode from denting in any significant way Romanian public support for our common effort in Iraq. End comment.  
TAUBMAN